



Epilogue in a Puppet Show

By J. D. BERESFORD

Drawings by TONY SARG



MR. PUNCH thoughtfully scratched his head with his stick and stared philosophically at the four limp corpses in front of him.

"People may blame me," he reflected, "but what else could I have done? It is not as if these creatures had any real existence outside my own imagination. And surely I may be permitted to change my mind?"

"Here, for instance, is all that remains of my idea of Judy. Once she was my notion of a wife—a notion that I cherished as long as could reasonably be expected from a person of my imagination. She was a romantic conception, I am afraid, but for a time amusing. But I am too versatile to take delight for long in any one type of dream. The changes are too few, and as they become familiar, they begin to weary me. A man cannot live on a perpetual diet of sugar and cream.

And Judy—well, it may have been in part my fault, but it seems to me now that the sugar lost its sweetness and the cream turned sour. No doubt my palate was cloyed.

"But why do I speak in this metaphor? These creatures are those of the imagination, to whose command all the senses are but slaves. And it was not the senses that tired, but their master. We artists—"

Mr. Punch paused, gave his cap a slight rake, and, grounding the end of his stick on the floor, leaned one elbow on the top of it and crossed his legs.

"We artists," he repeated, rolling his eyes, "can live only by variety. The new idea enthralls us for a time, but for that very reason we all too soon exhaust it.

"Yet, God help me, what beautiful ideas have been mine!"

He glanced thoughtfully at the

drooping outline of the constable as he continued:

"That idea of justice, now. What an exquisite conception it once appeared, and how trite it has become! I made the common mistake, I see, in the attempt to universalize it. Universal justice! A magnificent idea, but in practice the thing is impossible, because your theory has to be administered by the lesser minds, dressed in a little brief authority.

"We give them a uniform," Mr. Punch went on after an interval of ecstatic contemplation, gently thudding the corpse of the constable with his stick as he spoke—"we give them a uniform to show that they are the slaves of an idea. They learn by rote and act by habit; and so it is that the essence of the idea is squandered. For we others have passed on, and have no longer the inclination to renew it. To us comes the moment and the conception. We make the religion and the law, and leave the lesser minds to their practice, which little by little falls steadily below the level of our inspiration until the last breath of it is dispersed.

"But it is better so, for their automatism is the means of change. I regret none of my killings. Once the thought has been crystallized into expression, it must inevitably die inch by gradual inch. And if I had clung to these old notions of mine, I, too, would have suffered a slow paralysis."

And with a sudden fury, Mr. Punch began violently to belabor the dull body of the constable.

"Oh, dead beyond any hope of recovery," he remarked presently, wiping the sweat from his hands on Judy's skirt. "We can no longer abide this foolish pretense of human justice.

It reeks of the Sunday-school and the solemn inanities of the law-courts. It is a cloak for humbug and a defense against the greed of the disinherited. I will rid my mind of it, and walk abroad once more a free man.

"And with it goes, also, this foolish idea of retribution, this black menace of punishment decreed by some supernatural judge.

"Lord! that I should have spent my youth in terror, bowed under the threat of that idea! Yet I revered it. Even now I can see that it touches the superb. Without it, tragedy becomes but a poor, mechanical thing, a mere invention.

"But you, also, my friend," Mr. Punch continued, thoughtfully prodding the ribs of the flaccid executioner, "are revealed to me at last as no more than an invention on a higher plane of thought. Higher than mortal justice you were, because you represented the poetic inevitable. You, in your mask and sable, were the enigmatical emissary of the unseen gods, the unescapable monitor, the final sentence of doom, and, incidentally, a great begetter of proverbs. None could avoid you in the end. You were death on earth and hell in eternity. And by anything that is greater than I, I am well rid of you, oh, last of the manacles!"

For some time after he had concluded this speech Mr. Punch leaned on his stick and meditated profoundly. Then rousing himself, he glanced suspiciously at the clown who lay at the end of the row in an attitude that faintly suggested the histrionic.

"Elusive creature!" Mr. Punch apostrophized him; "how many times I have spared you! But I thank Heaven that I am nothing if not consistent. Shall I discard my old ideas one by

one and leave this single notion of the joy of life to hamper me?

"Impossible! For it comes to me, now, with a great certainty that I am at the beginning of a new road. No man can be as great and free as Zoroaster until he has discarded the idea of joy, so rightly tricked in the motley of a clown. And so long as I pay it one lingering tribute either of respect or desire, I am, myself, no more than a puppet and play-actor.

"But let me once be sure that this idea, also, has been truly and undeniably killed, and I can walk out of this loathsome prison that I have called home into the ultimate freedom of the enlightened."

And, with that, Mr. Punch spat upon his hands and took a strong hold of his stick. But as he was in the act of striking he paused to gaze with an earnest scrutiny at the drooping body of the clown.

"But he is already dead," Mr. Punch remarked a trifle uneasily. "Why, then, should I tire myself in so redundant a task as killing the slain?

And yet shall I ever have peace of mind unless I am absolutely sure? Strange that I should have hesitated to make this last small sacrifice, I, the greatest of all men. Nor will I. None shall hereafter call me puppet."

When he had assured himself of the death of the clown, Mr. Punch rested awhile to recover from the physical effort. His ears still rang with the sound of his own blows, and the virtue had momentarily gone out of him.

But after a few minutes his pride began to reassert itself. He rose, and walked to the door. The sun was shining on the road. The world was open before him.

"And now," said Mr. Punch, tucking his stick jauntily under his arm, "what 's to do?" He hesitated a moment before he could find the answer. Then, "Why, obviously," he said, "I must seek a new idea, and kill it."

The tassel of his cap swung valiantly as he stepped over the threshold.

And straightway the clown arose from the floor and followed him.

